Service saves hard disk disasters

BUSINESS TOOLS

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There is a dark side of computing: There are over 30 million catastrophes waiting to happen.

That's roughly how many hard disks are in use and that's how many hard disks someday will fail. Your business could be wiped out along with its data if your disk "crashes" and you aren't up to date with backups.

Now, however, there is somewhere you can turn if the worst happens. A national data recovery service called Ontrack specializes in retrieving data from nonfunctioning hard disks.

There are a lot of ways your hard disk-stored data can suddenly become inaccessible: power surges or failures, network failures, worn out hard disk bearings or attacks from "virus" programs.

A hard disk crash can be figurative or more literal. An actual crash is when the read-write heads, which normally just skim along the surface of the hard disk platters, suddenly start imitating a John Deere tractor breaking sod. The sod in this case is your vital business data encoded by weak magnetic forces on the surface of one or more "platters" within the hard disk.

If you fall victim to any of these mishaps, and you haven't been up to date in backing up, and your data is vital to your business, you should first quickly contact a local expert through a reputable computer repair facility.

If this person confirms that a crash has taken place, calling Ontrack and explaining the problem would be your next step. If they can help, you'll need to have your local expert remove the disk drive and send it to them.

If there is mechanical damage to the hard disk Ontrack will disassemble it in a "clean room" environment and, if necessary, salvage the individual platters.

Then, the company will rebuild the file and directory structure of your hard disk. And finally, technicians will attempt to reconstruct your lost files.

The data is restored onto floppies and returned to you with a program that copies it on a new drive.

■ Cost. The minimum charge is $200 for an initial diagnosis. If it's determined that recovery is hopeless, $100 will be returned. Otherwise the recovery procedures will proceed for an additional $200 to $600. According to the firm, the average total cost for restoring data from a PC hard disk is $500 to $600.

■ Time. The initial diagnosis typically takes 24 hours. Ontrack says it strives for a turnaround of three to five days once the process begins.

■ Options. For large computer operations it may not be feasible to pack up a big hard disk and send it out for repair. Recognizing this problem, Ontrack has a mobile team that will travel to disaster sites. This service, which includes a team of technicians and specialized equipment, costs about $2,000 a day.

For less severe catastrophes, like accidently erased files or mistakenly reformatted hard disks, it's wise to contact local experts before calling a firm like Ontrack. Files and disks can often be restored using programs such as Norton Utilities for less cost. Luckily, perhaps 95 percent of all data-loss problems can be remedied in this way.

But for that disastrous 5 percent that can't, even the local experts now turn to firms like Ontrack.

■ The Bottom Line: Just as some people refuse to wear seat belts, others refuse to do backups.

For those with a cavalier approach to data integrity, I suggest keeping this number and address handy: Ontrack Data Recovery Inc., 6200 Bury Drive, Eden Prairie, Minn. 55346; (800) 752-1333.

Hillel Segal's weekly column evaluates gadgets, small-computer hardware and software, seminars, and books designed to enhance business productivity.